



Hegemony

We have looked at the basic theory of armed struggle, courtesy of Clausewitz. We have looked at Imperialism, which among other things is a regime of permanent war. And we have looked at the political theory of revolutionary insurrection, also courtesy of Lenin. This course will continue to examine such theoretical problems of war and peace, in the context of the age of Imperialism.

This week we look at the contested concept of “Hegemony”.

The concept of “Hegemony” is contested between those who would wish for a third way, or to quote Robespierre, “a revolution without a revolution”; and on the other hand, those

who recognise that there is no such third way, and that the real history and meaning of “hegemony” is no different from “class dictatorship”. In other words, Marx and Engels were right to say at the beginning of the “[Communist Manifesto](#)” that *“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,”* and that the class struggle would have to be fought to a finish.

For many years past this polemic has been conducted around the historical personality and the literary legacy of Antonio Gramsci. People, including academics who should know better, falsely cite Gramsci as if he was a supporter of some third way, which he was not.

Gramsci was an orthodox communist, and was not in the least bit opposed to his contemporary, Lenin. All the material published in recent decades to the effect that Gramsci was a soft kind of communist, or that Gramsci had a theory of revolution (perhaps called “hegemony”) that could succeed without any rudeness or unpleasantness of the Lenin kind, is all spurious and fraudulent.

The term “hegemony” needs to be rescued. A shortened version of Perry Anderson’s long article (New Left Review, 1/100, November-December 1976) about all this is attached, and downloadable via the link below. Here is a quotation from it:

“The term ‘hegemony’ is frequently believed to be an entirely novel coinage—in effect, [Gramsci’s] own

invention. Nothing reveals the lack of ordinary scholarship from which Gramsci's legacy has suffered more than this widespread illusion. For in fact the notion of hegemony had a long prior history. The term gegemoniya (hegemony) was one of the most central political slogans in the Russian Social-Democratic movement, from the late 1890s to 1917.

"In a letter to Struve in 1901, demarcating social-democratic from liberal perspectives in Russia, Axelrod now stated as an axiom: 'By virtue of the historical position of our proletariat, Russian Social-Democracy can acquire hegemony (gegemoniya) in the struggle against absolutism.' [19] The younger generation of Marxist theorists adopted the concept immediately.

"Lenin could without further ado refer in a letter written to Plekhanov to 'the famous "hegemony" of Social-Democracy' and call for a political newspaper as the sole effective means of preparing a 'real hegemony' of the working class in Russia. [21] In the event, the emphasis pioneered by Plekhanov and Axelrod on the vocation of the working class to adopt an 'all-national' approach to politics and to fight for the liberation of every oppressed class and group in society was to be developed, with a wholly new scope and eloquence, by Lenin in What is to be Done? in 1902—a text read and approved in advance by Plekhanov, Axelrod and Potresov, which ended precisely with an urgent plea for the formation of the revolutionary newspaper that was to be Iskra."

What Perry Anderson demonstrates is that “hegemony”, far from being an alternative to the working class ascendancy otherwise referred to as the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, is in fact exactly the same idea, and was understood as such without any reservations at all by Antonio Gramsci in all his works.

This article is worth keeping in mind as an insurance against the inevitable return of the fake “hegemony-Gramsci” third-way myth. Tomorrow we will look at a similar but much shorter article.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci, 1976, Perry Anderson](#) (short version).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).